

Dance Department History Project 2010-2011

Transcribed interview of Marilyn Berrett on November 18, 2010

Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis

My name is Marilyn Berrett. I did my undergrad in dance performance at the University of Utah. I was the Elizabeth R. Hayes scholarship recipient in my graduating class, which was a great opportunity. It made it possible for me to get my degree. I did my graduate work here at BYU. My thesis was Boys and Dance, a statistical analysis to their attitude toward dance before and after the program.

My teachers included, of course, Phyllis Jacobsen, who was directing the graduate program from 1981 up until I finished in 1984, but I didn't graduate until '85. I took a little time because of knee surgeries and took a few hiatuses. I was hired in 1985. Sadly, one of the reasons I came to BYU was because Dee Winterton invited me here.

We used to run into each other in professional dance workshops and what not, and he said, "I just keep thinking we need you to be at BYU."

Suspiciously now, I think he just didn't want to teach the dance methods class anymore. He wanted me to come and do it. That was a kind of his nudge at this time. Also, my husband was a wild fan of all things BYU. He said ever since we've been married that he has had a thought that I had a destiny down here.

Sure enough, I ended up here doing grad work and being hired. Dee Winterton was one of my mentors, of course. Once I got here, I was able to take some classes, but mostly to work with him. Pat Debenham directed the Dancer's Company—now known as Contemporary Dance Theatre—and as a grad student in my second year, I performed with them. Dee was still considered the artistic director at the time and we had a two-week excursion to Hawaii. That two-week learning period was intensive and wondrous to work with Dee Winterton and Pat and engage the students in meaningful expressive ways of dance. We had a lot of fun doing it.

I've been thinking about Dee Winterton and how a wonderful mentor he was. It's just one of those things you don't think about, but while I was doing graduate work, and shortly after my serious accident while I was having surgeries, Dee used to show up at my house. He'd bring me a book; tell me he's thinking about me. A man as busy as Dee who would take the time to do a one on one on a graduate student, it has impacted me in ways I can't even describe.

Probably most poignant was that Dee was always nudging me to come here to BYU, and he was killed in a car accident while I was here doing my graduate work. As time passed, I was invited to apply for the faculty position he vacated. Ultimately, that is the position that I took; I took Dee's position. You know, he was irreplaceable. I try every day to honor him because of the way he impacted my life and many others. I hope that in some small way I have carried forth a legacy that would make Dee proud. I'd still rather not be here and have him here if I had my way. I'm still so grateful for him and the way he kept saying I ought to come to BYU. Tragically, sadly, his was the very position I ended up with.

We have great leadership here at BYU. I've been in the modern dance division, which has changed its name, so I'm now in the contemporary dance division. Truthfully, we have had a lot of great fun in the contemporary dance. We have fun, I mean we take things seriously, but we have fun. My initial work was with the Dancer's Company. I was the director and taught the technique class for the division. I was really a joint teacher for Dance 260, which is a survey class, Intro to Dance. It used to be filled with athletes and students from the College of Health and Human Performance who were somehow being instructed to take this class. I taught that course for a number of years. Gradually, I have focused on what my thesis is. I've come full circle back to education, Children in dance being my primary area. I have so much more to learn.

My main area of research has been dance pedagogy, working in public schools. I took one sabbatical in the twenty-nine years I've been here, and that's probably not a good thing to talk about, I should probably take more. But that one sabbatical was specifically to get my elementary education dance education.

You might wonder, *Why would someone with a master's degree and on a tenure track want to go get a teaching certification?*

I had a feeling in my heart that I wanted to walk a mile in the shoes of the people I was trying to convince to do more dance in the classroom. I learned a lot and ended up teaching a first grade class. It was hard. I realized I didn't know as much as I thought I did about being a classroom teacher. I have great respect for those people, and I'm still enjoying teaching the students who aspire to be classroom teachers.

While I've been here, my responsibilities with the Dancer's Company very often included the outreach programs that we would do when we were on tour. We would go to elementary schools to do lecture demonstrations to go into high schools and universities and do performances and to always teach classes. Whether it was a class for children, teachers, or dance majors, the teaching part of our residencies and the tours of the Dancers' Company is where I always felt so at home. I love choreography, I love coaching students towards better performances, and I love to see them transform when they are in a class in another place introducing dance to the uninitiated. All that said, I kept feeling like the current university administration (from 2002 to 2001) were talking about how important undergrad teaching was. The university wanted us to do more with undergrad student mentoring.

There was this notion of how the dancers started: when students would come to the workshops and say, "I want to learn how to do this."

I would say, "Just come with me, and I'll take you to the schools I do this at."

I took them and I kept thinking, *This would be a great class for these students.*

With the idea of undergrad student mentoring, and the idea to encourage and persuade people at other schools to start having a dance program in their schools, led to a student performance choreography teaching company with emphasis on teaching. Faculty approved it in 2001, the first performing group, but it wasn't official until 2002. We didn't have a name for a while.

I said to the students, "I think it is very important this be a slightly different experience. If we are all a learning community, all of us are part of making the decision, to a point."

I had to make some of the decisions; they had to understand I was the director, but that I would look to them for input. We generated ideas for a name and walked around the studio for two hours talking about different names. Finally the students came up with the spelling and the name, Kinnect, which is a fusion word between kinesthetic, bodily movement, and connections: people to communities, curriculum to the world. That's how Kinnect got its name. We didn't have a name for two weeks.

Kinnect is a dance education outreach company that presents to schools, in very interactive lecture demonstrations or assemblies. Then, after the assembly, we spread out in every open space and we teach individual classes in their own creative dance process. We give them a core curriculum connection.

"Could you teach fractions through dance, or social studies through dance, or this science concept?"

We have a very education rich integrated approach. The students try out for Kinnect because they want to perform. They leave though saying that the performing was great, but they ended up loving teaching, which I think is what we are trying to do with Kinnect. It's a teaching company that also gets to dance.

I've also had lots of opportunity to work with Young Ambassadors. I've been doing choreography for the MDT area, operettas, and children's shows. I've choreographed experimental theatre productions. They have been wonderful collaborations with the College of Fine Arts. I've worked on community's initiatives that have helped me rub shoulders with colleagues across campus. I've worked with advisory councils and served as the rep for my college. I've had a lot of citizenship opportunities. I've been very active with the support of BYU in many professional organizations including the National Dance Association, the National Dance Education Organization, Dance and the Child Organization, and the National Dance Festival Association. I've been very active with these four organizations while here at BYU and enjoy citizenship.

I love teaching. I've taught a variety of courses from lecture courses to teaching pedagogy and methods classes, to technique, composition and of course directing of companies and orientation courses. I've been able to have collaborative projects where I designed new tech I have a product called *Dance is B.E.S.T!: A Teacher's Resource*. It's a videotape of dance lessons taught with the actual method being used while it is being seen in the video.

When I say "You need to make effective transitions," the word "transition" comes up and they see what it looks like.

Or the strategy of crossing over or suggesting another element of class students can use, you see it happening and the text comes across so they can identify what those strategies and methods look like. It's been a very helpful tool not just with teachers I train, but also students here at the university to teach in their future.

I think as I've been here going on thirty years, the sweetest parts of being involved are the opportunities to share my testimony with my students and colleagues to be able to have the artistry and the couched and framed knowledge of Jesus Christ. Those opportunities are unique and they are sweet. The students and their eagerness to learn and their hard work and creative works soften.